

# Gibberish or code?

Does the mysterious Voynich manuscript depict a naked Jewish rite? *Andrew Robinson is sceptical*

## THE VOYNICH MANUSCRIPT

foreword by Stephen Skinner,  
introduced by Rafal T Prinke  
and René Zandbergen



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When the late Italian semiotician Umberto Eco paid a visit to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University a few years ago, the only thing he asked to see was MS 408 – otherwise known as the Voynich Manuscript.

It was an understandable lure for the author of *The Name of the Rose*, a murder mystery set in the mazelike library of a medieval

Italian monastery. The Voynich has an excellent claim to be the world's most mysterious manuscript. It was created in an unknown country by an unknown hand some time between 1404 and 1438, according to recent radiocarbon dating of its parchment. It was transmitted to the modern world by Italian Jesuits, who eventually sold it, in 1912, under dubious circumstances, to Wilfrid Voynich, a Polish-born revolutionary who had wound up dealing rare books in London.

The manuscript's weird and wonderful illustrations, and its apparently alphabetic yet wholly undeciphered calligraphy, have baffled endless scholars and cryptographers, both professional and amateur. In 1967, a leading historian of cryptography called the manuscript "the longest, the best known, the most tantalising, the most heavily attacked, the most resistant, and the most expensive of historical cryptograms".

"Is it the work of extra-

terrestrials? The ramblings of a madman? Or the secret book of an historical figure such as Leonardo da Vinci?" ask the Voynich scholars Rafal Prinke and René Zandbergen in their nicely judged introduction to this latest edition of the manuscript. "Every year we receive many new proposed solutions from countries far and wide."

Page-by-page colour reproductions of the 234-page manuscript make up most of the book. The printing quality is fine for both art lovers and would-be decipherers, but the format is smaller than Yale University Press's facsimile, published last year under the editorship of the manuscript's curator, Raymond Clemens, in which each page of the original is reproduced at near-actual size (around 23cm x 16cm). Nor does this Watkins edition reproduce the fold-out pages of the manuscript as fold-outs, unlike the Yale edition; it also lacks the latter's diverse scholarly introductions, and signally fails to mention its rival anywhere at all. However, the Yale edition costs nearly twice as much: readers must choose what they are willing to pay for.

Stephen Skinner's foreword, unlike the introduction by Prinke and Zandbergen, proposes a new and controversial theory, based on the manuscript's illustrations rather than its text. An untypical section of the illustrations – which mostly depict plants, stars and zodiacs as found in herbalist and astrological manuals – shows completely naked women bathing together in intestine-like water systems. According to Skinner, these communal baths resemble the concept, though not the actual structure, of the medieval Jewish ritual bath known as the *mikvah* that still exists among orthodox Jews, in which women are required to bathe so as to restore their ritual purity after menstruation or childbirth.

In support of this identification, he argues that the Jewish *mikvah* – unlike the Turkish or Roman bath – is one of the very few

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The first block of text in the Voynich Manuscript, written in the characteristic script. It consists of approximately 15 lines of text, starting with a large initial letter. The text is dense and appears to be a continuous passage.



The second block of text, continuing the script. It is similar in style to the first block, with a large initial letter and dense, illegible characters.



The third block of text, continuing the script. It is similar in style to the previous blocks, with a large initial letter and dense, illegible characters.

It's a mystery: the Voynich Manuscript

institutions in which women wash together naked and without the presence of men. Moreover, the

illustrations on one page show concern for the problem of water reticulation: a feature of the

*mikvah*, which allows polluted water to drain away without contaminating the pure reservoir. Moreover, "if, as has sometimes been suggested, the illustrations symbolise intestines, then there is no conceivable reason why they should be populated by women."

Combining the possible presence of the *mikvah* with some slight architectural evidence of Ghibelline fortifications peculiar to northern Italy shown in a small sketch of a castle on one of the other pages leads Skinner to his theory. The Voynich Manuscript was probably "the working handbook of an herbalist-astrologer-physician", who was "almost certainly Jewish", perhaps part of "a Jewish community in a northern Italian city such as Pisa". The Jewish hypothesis, he maintains, is supported by the absence of any Christian imagery in the manuscript, which is most unusual for the period.

Well, maybe. But even if this theory turns out to be correct, rather than merely plausible, it will bring us no nearer to deciphering the Voynich's text. Jewish or not in origin, the text reveals, when analysed for numbers and patterns of symbols, that while it is probably an alphabet, it has too much redundancy to be writing any of the following languages: English, French, German, Italian, Spanish or indeed Japanese.

"Given all the fruitless efforts to decipher the text, one has to wonder if the Voynich Manuscript might not be meaningless after all", conclude Prinke and Zandbergen. Skinner disagrees: "Eventually it will be cracked, because I am sure that it is not simply gibberish." Given the overall sophistication of the manuscript, I am inclined to agree with Skinner. But unless independent examples of the script turn up in the future - or (very unlikely) a bilingual inscription like the Rosetta Stone - there is little encouragement to be drawn from the history of decipherment that the Voynich Manuscript will give up its centuries of secrecy.

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